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Chairman: Congressman Christopher Shays

Iraq in its Neighborhood

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored to be here. I do have a brief written statement which I submit for the record, with your permission.

It is hard to think of bringing new things about Iraq to you, Congressman Shays. You have been in and out of that country so many times, and you have invested so much of your energy in that big American project. This has never been some distant political issue for you. You have been driven by the most decent of motives – success for our country in Iraq, and deliverance for the Iraqis.

In my small share of this inquiry and hearings you have held, I thought, per your guidelines, to focus on the regional setting of the Iraq war, on how this campaign in Iraq plays out under Arab and Iranian eyes. From the very beginning of this war, in 2003, this project in Iraq doubled up as a big endeavor to repair that country, to make it less lethal both to its own people and to its neighbors, and at the same time to offer it as a showcase of America's determination to make a stand against the political malignancies of the region. In those momentous three or so years behind us, Iraq would be the thing and its opposite. Autocrats and embattled liberals alike in the region would read their hopes and fears into Iraq.

For me, one way of highlighting the meaning of the war in Iraq for the larger Arab-Islamic world is a remark by a mayor of Baghdad in late 2004, that I picked up from the writing of one of our able commanders in Iraq, General Peter Chiarelli: "The rulers of the region are nervous, the people of the region are envious." This was on the eve of what could be dubbed the Revolution of Purple Ink, when in a dramatic election, in January 2005, Iraqis went to the polls and surprised themselves and inspired their neighbors by the example of their courage, and their desire to be done with despotism.

The question now is whether that hopeful, proud observation about the nervousness of the rulers and the envy of the neighboring populations still holds? Is the ruler in Cairo nervous about Iraq's example, or is he more likely now to hold up Iraq as a warning to those who would dare dream that there is for Arabs a way out of autocracy and dictatorship. In other words, does Iraq vindicate Hosni Mubarak, or does it give heart to those in Egypt who dared step forth in recent years to challenge the Pharaonic system that Mubarak has put in place with the transparent intention to bequeath power to his son after he himself passes from the scene? Does Iraq give sustenance to Bashar al Asad's primitive tyranny in Damascus, or does it inspire those brave enough in Syria to want for their country more than the sterile rule of the military and the minority sect that anchors that regime. In the same vein, are women in Arabia envious that their counterparts in Iraq vote and hold seats in the National Assembly or are they resigned to their condition, and grateful to be spared the violence and the insecurity of Iraq?

I raise these questions without offering settled answers to them, or to the larger debate about the meaning of this Iraq campaign in its regional setting. Opponents of the war in this country are sure that we had riled up that universe in Araby, shattered its peace, and unleashed its furies. But all had not been well in the region before America struck into Iraq. Anti-Americanism, anti-modernism, the rancid, floating hatred that fed the jihadists, and brought them our way five years ago, pre-dated Iraq. The American desire to launch out of Iraq a broader campaign of deterrence against radical forces of the region may not have been successful in every way, but the effort has paid its own dividends.

From the very beginning, it has to be understood, this battle often seemed like a struggle between American will and the laws of the gravity of the region. The local spectators in the Arab world, and in Iran, did not know how the play would unfold, but they were secure in the knowledge that they "knew" Iraq and its defects and that America didn't. These spectators had their age-old pessimism about their world. The American assertion that Iraq would change was the first challenge in a very long time to the pessimism of a people who had seen the coming and breaking of many storms, who had witnessed many false dawns. Ill-wishers in Cairo and Ramallah and Damascus and Amman were sure we would fail because little in their own world had worked, or had succeeded, in many, many years.

From the very beginning, America was destined to be alone in its work in Iraq. This was not about evicting Saddam from a succulent, little country next door as had been the case in 1990-1991. Back then the despot in Baghdad had broken faith with people who had bankrolled his long war against Iran, he had sacked an independent principality, he had assaulted the region's balance of power. He had brought his army to the edge of the oil fields in Saudi Arabia. Thrown back across an international frontier, the dictator had been folded back again into the order of his neighborhood. He had grown less menacing to the rulers, less meaningful and less inspiring to the populace. Truth be told, the order of power in the region had come into a level of comfort with Saddam. Sanctions and Anglo-American power seemed to be taking care of him. And by 2002, there was in the air the smell – the stench – of reconciliation between the Iraq regime and the Arab order of power. This new war, a dozen years later, was different. Shrewd and sly, the Arab rulers were never going to be enlisted in this American project. We were heading into the internal affairs of a big Arab country, our forces, and the repressed population they brought out into the streets, were toppling Saddam's monuments and statues. We were chasing a dictator – but to the Arab rulers a fellow strongman – into a spider hole; the man flushed out of that spider hole had been the dominant figure of an era of Arab political life. "There but for the grace of God go I," the young ruler in Damascus must have reasoned. And the ruler on the banks of the Nile understood the demonstration effect of what had played out in Iraq even as he insisted that Iraq held no meaning for Egypt. A trial awaited Saddam, a cautionary tale in a region where rulers had never been accountable for their terrible deeds.

It was inevitable that the Arabs would read this American project through the prism of their own experience, that they would translate this war, if you will, into Arab categories. We had upended an order of power in Baghdad, dominated as it had been for a long time

by the Sunni Arabs. We had, whether we intended it or not, emancipated the Shia stepchildren of the Arab world, and the Kurds as well. We had sinned against the order of the universe. Our innocence was astounding. We were over-turning the order of a millennium, but calling on the region to celebrate, and to bless, our work. We had protected the Kurds, but we wanted them to stay within Iraq, we were eager not to offend our erstwhile allies in Turkey even as they sandbagged our effort in Iraq, even after they had succumbed to new, incoherent levels of anti-Americanism. More to the point, we had set the Shia on their own course. We had done for them what they would never have been able to do on their own. We had rid them of a regime that had subjected them to more than three decades of terror. For our part, we were ambivalent about the coming of age of the Shia. We had battled radical Shi'ism in Iran and in Lebanon in the 1980s. The symbols of Shi'ism, we associated with political violence – radical mullahs, martyrology, suicide bombers. True, in the interim, we had had a war – undeclared but a war nonetheless – with Sunni jihadists. The furies that had targeted us in the 1990s, that had trailed us at home and abroad, taking its toll on our embassies and battleships and housing compounds, finally shattering the tranquility of our country on 9/11, were Sunni furies. These furies had emerged out of the deep structure of Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. But there had lingered in us an aversion to radical Shi'ism, an understandable residue of the campaign of virtue and terror that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had waged against American power in the 1980s.

We were susceptible as well to the representations made to us by Arab rulers in the Sunni-ruled states about the dangers of radical Shi'ism. It was in that vein that the Jordanian monarch, Abdullah II, warned of the dangers of a "Shia crescent" stretching from Iran to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. And it was out of the same urge to simplify and distort the truth of the Arab world that the ruler in Cairo observed that the loyalty of the Shia Arabs was to Iran and not to their own governments. When the Jordanian monarch warned of that crescent, one of his subjects, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was on the loose in Iraq hunting down American "crusaders" and Shia heretics alike. As for the ruler in Cairo, it was in his prisons that men like Ayman al-Zawahiri, a son of a great Cairene family, and countless others like him, had picked up the deadly hatred for the Pax Americana that sustains Mubarak's military autocracy. America had been caught in the crossfire: Zawahiri had targeted us because he had been unable to take on the reign of official terror in his own country. And still the ruler in Cairo would insist on the dangers of radical Shi'ism.

The Shia had come into the political life of Iraq, but strictly speaking there is no Shia government in that country. The Shia have the weight of their numbers, but the power in the land is divided. To balance a Shia prime minister and minister of interior, the Kurds claim the presidency, the ministry of foreign affairs, a deputy prime minister, and a chief of staff of the armed forces. For their part, the Sunni Arabs have sent the most representative of their community, some uncompromising hardliners into this government: for all the talk of their disinheritance, the Sunni Arabs claim the portfolios of a vice president, a deputy prime minister, a minister of defense, and the speakership of a Parliament. There is obvious "sectarianism" in the division of spoils, but it is better than the monopoly of power which is the rule of the day in neighboring lands.

Iran cannot run away with Iraq, and the talk of an ascendant Iran in Iraqi affairs is overblown. We belittle the Shia of Iraq – their sense of home, and of a tradition so thoroughly Iraqi and Arab - when we write them off as willing instruments of Iran's ambitions. Inevitably, there is Iranian money in Iraq, and Iranian agents, but this is the logic of a 900-mile Iranian-Iraqi border. True, in the long years of Tikriti/Saddamist dominion, Shia political men persecuted by the regime sought sanctuary in Iran; a political party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and its military arm, the Badr Brigade, had risen in those years with Iranian patronage. But the Iraqi exiles are not uniform in their attitudes toward Iran. Those years in exile had been hard, the Iranian hosts had been given to arrogance and paternalism. The Iraqi exiles and their needs had been subordinated to the strategic necessities of the Iranian regime. Much is made, and appropriately so, of the way the Americans who prosecuted the first Gulf War of 1990-1991 had called for rebellions by the Shia (and the Kurds) only to walk away in indifference as the Saddam regime struck back with vengeance. But the Iranians, too, had looked after their own interests and had averted their gaze from the slaughter. No Iranians had crossed to Iraq to help their Shia brethren, nor had Iraqis themselves been permitted to cross into Iraq to aid that doomed rebellion. States are merciless, the Persian state no exception to that rule. Iraqis who waited out the Saddam tyranny in Iranian exile have brought back with them memories of Iranian indifference. Men like former prime minister Ibrahim Jaafari and his successor Nuri al-Maliki, leaders of the Daawa Party, are described by their detractors as allies of Iran. In a dispatch of days ago, (September 13), the visit of Nuri al-Maliki to Iran was described in The New York Times as something of a "homecoming." But Maliki's exile was in the main spent in Damascus; he had begun his exile in Iran only to quit that country for a long, extended stay of 17 years in Syria. Jaafari, too, had made a statement of his own on that Arab-Persian divide. He had quit Iran for London.

We should not try to impose more order and more consensus on the world of Shia Iraq than is warranted by the facts. In recent days a great fault-line within the Shia could be seen: the leader of the Supreme Council for the Revolution in Iraq, Sayyid Abdulaziz al-Hakim, has launched a big campaign for an autonomous Shia federated unit that would take in the overwhelmingly Shia provinces in the south and the middle Euphrates, but this project has triggered the furious opposition of Hakim's nemesis, the young cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. In the way of such distinctions, while Hakim seems deferential to Iran, Sadr, the descendent of another high clerical family long at odds with the Hakims, openly appeals to Iraqi and Arab sensibilities. Hakim's bid was transparent. He sought to be the uncrowned king of a Shia polity, in all but name. He had fought for that project, but he was rebuffed. Sadr was joined in opposition to that scheme by the Daawa Party of Maliki, by the Virtue Party, and by those secular Shiites who had come into the national assembly with former prime minister Iyad Allawi. A bitter struggle now plays out in the Shia provinces between the operatives of the Badr Brigade and Sadr's Mahdi Army. The fight is draped in religious colors – but it is about the spoils of power, control over oil and turf and the patronage of cabinet appointments. Nor have we heard the last of Shia secularism: trounced in the last round of elections, it survives. It is driven by the familiar desire of ordinary men and women aware of the dangers of mixing the sacred

and the profane, keen to keep the religious enforcers at bay. A nemesis stalks Iraq; but it is chaos and drift, not the false specter of Shia theocracy and dominion.

Increasingly Iraq seems ungovernable. The truculence of the Sunni Arabs has brought forth the Shia vengeance that a steady campaign of anti-Shia terror was bound to trigger. Sunni elements have come into the government, but only partly so. That incomparable Kurdish and Iraqi political leader, President Jalal Talabani, put it well when he said that there are elements in Iraq that partake of government in the daytime, and of terror at night. This is true of the Sunni Arabs, as it is true of the Shia. The (Sunni) insurgents had been relentless: in the most recent of events, they have taken terror deep into Sadr City. The results were predictable: the death squads of the Mahdi Army soon struck back.

It is idle to debate whether Iraq is in a state of civil war. The semantics are tendentious, and in the end irrelevant. Terror is on the loose in Iraq, and the battle for Baghdad will determine the future of this Iraqi government. A well-wisher of Iraq, outgoing British Ambassador William Patey, in a memorandum to his prime minister, which found its way into the public domain, put it starkly: "The prospect of a low-intensity civil war and a de-facto division of Iraq is probably more likely at this stage than a successful transition to a stable democracy," his memo read. Patey struck a balance in his note. "Iraq's position," he added, "is not hopeless." Its course was likely to be "messy and difficult" for the next five to 10 years. "Even the lowered expectations for President Bush in Iraq – a government that can sustain itself and govern itself and is an ally in the war on terror – must remain in doubt."

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It is not a rhetorical flourish to say that the burden lies with Iraq's leaders. No script had America staying indefinitely in Iraq, fighting Iraq's wars, securing Iraq's peace. The best we can do for Iraq is grant it time to develop the military and political capabilities that would secure it against insurgencies at home, and subversion from across its borders. No one can say with confidence how long the American body politic will tolerate the expense in blood and treasure incurred in Iraq. It would be safe to assume that this president will stick to this war, that its burden is likely to be passed onto his successor. The Iraqis are approaching reckoning time, for America's leaders are under pressure to force history's pace. The political process here at home is not likely to impose a precise deadline for an American withdrawal: But the Iraqis should not be lulled into complacency, for the same political process is more likely to draw parameters on this commitment in Iraq, limits of tolerance.

In contemplating the prospects of a reduced American commitment, we don't need to evoke the specter of a domino theory, nor do we need to fall back on the old, familiar argument of protecting our "credibility" in the eyes of Arabs and Iranians. It could be said that the sky will not fall in neighboring lands if we quit Iraq, that the states of the region can fend for themselves. Those who rule by terror (Egypt, Syria, Yemen) will hunker down and increase the dose of terror. Those who rule by money and the purse

(Saudi Arabia, the smaller states of the Gulf) will loosen the purse strings, and scurry away, if only temporarily, from the Pax Americana. They will insist that they had never signed up for this war, that they had warned us against Iraq's dangers, that they had tried to tell us that Iraq was, in their eyes, prone to sedition and violence, that it was never the proper soil for democratic aspirations. They will feel relieved, these rulers of the region, of the siren song of democracy, they will feel vindicated that the franji call for democratic reform can now be set aside in favor of autocratic stability. They will have waited out the American campaign for reform. They will begin to say, in louder decibel, what they had been whispering amid themselves: that the Bush diplomacy of freedom died in the anarchy of the Anbar province, and in the dangerous streets of Baghdad, that in Araby the choice is stark: tyranny or anarchy, and they will remind one and all of the maxim of their world: Better sixty years of tyranny than one day of anarchy.

For their part, the Iranians will press on: The spectacle of power they display is illusory. It is a broken society over which the mullahs rule. A society that throws on the scene a leader of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's derangement is not an orderly land; foreigners may not be able to overthrow that regime, but countries can atrophy as their leaders – in this case armed by an oil windfall of uncertain duration – strut on the world stage. The prospect of Iraq changing Iran, shaming it by the success of a liberal example next door, was unrealistic to begin with. Iran's is a deeper culture than Iraq's, proud to its place in the world, possessed of a keen sense of Persia's excellence and primacy in the region around it. What Iranians make of their own history will not wait on the kind of society that will emerge in Iraq. On the margins, a scholarly tradition in Najaf given to moderation and restraint could be a boon to the seminarians and clerics of Iran. But the Iranians will not know deliverance from the sterility and mediocrity of their world if Iraq were to fail. Their schadenfreude over an American debacle in Iraq will have to be exceedingly brief. A raging fire next door to them would not be pretty. And crafty players, the Iranians know what so many in America who guess at such matters do not: that Iraq is an unwieldy land, that the Arab-Persian divide in culture, language, and temperament is not easy to bridge.

No great commitments can be abandoned without commensurate costs, it has to be understood. History works its will in unpredictable ways. The American debacle in Vietnam, some three decades ago, issued in the most unexpected of outcomes. That domino in Vietnam fell, there was horror in Cambodia. But as Peter Kann explained it in the pages of The Wall Street Journal a year ago, the peace and prosperity of Asia held, and from "Korea and Taiwan down the whole arc of southeast Asia, the political and economic systems we advocated have triumphed." The battle for Vietnam had been lost but the wider war for the future of Asia had been won. The war in Vietnam had bought time for Vietnam's neighbors; they had been anxious to keep the peace, and they needed American protection. They saw the promise of economic salvation; the horrors and failures of communism had engendered in them a greater desire to be spared history's furies and ruin.

It is unlikely that a failure in Iraq would be as forgiving as the failure in Vietnam; this region differs from east Asia. The doctrines of radicalism are stronger in Iraq's

neighborhood, there is no Japan-like power that would anchor peaceful change, provide hope that success can stick on Muslim lands in the manner that Japan did in its own Asian world. We needn't give credence to the assertion of President Bush that the jihadists would turn up in our cities if we pulled up stakes from Baghdad to recognize that a terrible price would be paid were we to opt for a hasty and unseemly withdrawal from Iraq.. This is a region with a keen and unmerciful eye for the weakness of strangers. Iraq may have tested our patience, and been a disappointment to many who had signed up for an easier campaign. We did not possess the skills of imperial rule, nor did we have an eye for the cunning – and ambiguities – of Arab and Iranian ways. But the heated debate about the origins of our drive into Iraq would surely pale by comparison to the debate that would erupt were we to give in to pessimism and despair and to cast the Iraqis adrift.

Nowadays, we are warned that the campaign for freedom in Arab lands ought to be abandoned, that in Iraq (as in Lebanon and Palestine) the cause of freedom ought to yield, that we best return to the stability offered by the autocrats. We have shaken up that world, it is said, only to reap a whirlwind. On the face of it, this argument is not without a measure of sobriety and appeal: the autocrats in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia keep the peace, while the lands that flirted with elections and new ways (the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Iraq) seem overwhelmed and close to the abyss. But we have already been given a deeper truth about the wages of autocracy in Arab lands. It was the children of the autocracies who flew into our towers on a clear September morning five years ago, who set us on the road to Kabul and Baghdad, who gave us this overwhelming task of trying to repair an Islamic world that insists on our culpability in the sad story of its demise and retrogression.